

The Himalayan Club



The Himalayan Club e-Letter

AUGUST 2026 ● Volume 49

Contents - Volume 49

CLUB NEWS

Report on the Annual Adventure Festival 2026	02
Mumbai Office opening	12
IMF Mountain Film Festival-India Tour by The Himalayan Club, Bengaluru Section	14

CLIMBS, TREKS AND EXPLORATIONS

An Honest Retelling of One of the Year's Best Climbs	16
2025 Awarded ascents Yashkuk Sar (6,667m)	28
Gasherbrum III (7,952m)	30
2025 Special Mention for Female Mountaineering	32

NEWS

History is shaped by persistence.	34
Survey finds wild cats at record heights	35
Thought To Ponder Upon	41
From Joshimath to Zojila—how Indians are loving the Himalayas to death. Literally	42
Everest: The crowded crown	47

MEMORIUM

Vijay Crishna	50
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Report on the Annual Adventure Festival 2026

By Ketan Jani

Introduction

The Himalayan Club's Annual Adventure Festival 2026 was a two-day celebration that brought together mountaineers, explorers, authors, researchers, climbers, and adventure enthusiasts from across India and abroad. The festival served as a platform to honour outstanding achievements in mountaineering, promote Himalayan literature, discuss responsible exploration, and strengthen the bonds within the mountain community.

A major highlight of this year's festival was the presence of Sir Chris Bonington, one of the world's most celebrated mountaineers and a towering figure in the history of Himalayan exploration. At the age of 91, Sir Chris travelled to India to participate in the festival, making his visit a truly historic occasion for The Himalayan Club and an unforgettable experience for members and the wider mountaineering fraternity. His presence added exceptional prestige to the event and provided a rare opportunity for participants to interact with one of the greatest living legends of mountaineering.

The programme featured distinguished lectures, award ceremonies, book presentations, panel discussions, film screenings, and interactive conversations with renowned personalities from the mountaineering world. The event reflected The Himalayan Club's commitment to preserving Himalayan heritage while inspiring future generations of adventurers.

Day 1 Report

Saturday, 21 March 2026

Theme: Honouring Achievement & Exploration

The first day of the festival focused on recognising excellence in mountaineering, celebrating remarkable expeditions, honouring distinguished individuals, and highlighting contributions to Himalayan literature and exploration. The programme offered attendees an opportunity to learn from internationally acclaimed Sir Chris Bonington, authors such as Dr. Alex McCay, and other explorers & climbers while celebrating significant achievements within the Himalay loving community.



Sir Chris Bonington graced the occasion

1. Registration & Networking

The festival commenced with participant registration, followed by an informal networking session. Members, guests, climbers, and outdoor enthusiasts interacted with one another, setting a collaborative and welcoming atmosphere for the two-day event.

2. Kaivan Mistry Memorial Lecture

Speaker: Spencer Gray

Topic: Kaqur Kangri

Recognition: Piolet d'Or 2025 Winner (Virtual)

The prestigious Kaivan Mistry Memorial Lecture featured Spencer Gray, who shared his experiences from the award-winning ascent of Kaqur Kangri. Delivered virtually, the session highlighted the technical challenges, expedition planning, teamwork, and commitment required for one of the world's most respected alpine achievements.

3. Kekoo Naoroji Book Award Ceremony & Presentation

Book: In Search of Mount Kailash

Author: Dr. Alex McCay

The festival recognised excellence in Himalayan literature through the Prestigious Kekoo Naoroji Book Award. Dr. Alex McCay presented insights from his acclaimed book, exploring the historical, geographical, cultural, and



Kekoo Naorji Book Award Ceremony & Presentation

spiritual significance of Mount Kailash and its enduring place in Himalayan history.

4. High Tea

A networking break allowed delegates, speakers, and members to exchange ideas, discuss the sessions, and strengthen relationships within the Himalayan community.

5. Garud Award Ceremony

Recipient: Takpa Tenzin



Garud Award Ceremony

The Garud Award Ceremony honoured Takpa Tenzin for his exceptional contribution to Himalayan adventure and mountaineering. The recognition celebrated dedication, perseverance, and excellence in the duty as support staff.

6. J. C. Nanavati Awards Ceremony & Presentation

Speaker: Rudra Prasad Halder

Topic: Exploration & First Ascents in Monto Massif, Ladakh



J. C. Nanavati Awards Ceremony & Presentation

This session showcased pioneering exploration in the Monto Massif region of Ladakh. Rudra Prasad Halder presented the story of new routes, first ascents, expedition planning, and the importance of documenting unexplored regions of the Himalaya.

7. Felicitation Ceremony

Honouree: Mr. Umesh Zirpe

The Himalayan Club felicitated its Life Member, Mr. Umesh Zirpe, in recognition for his receipt of the Tenzing Norgay National Adventure Award 2023 for the outstanding contribution to Indian mountaineering.

The ceremony also marked the official unveiling of The Himalayan Club Centenary Celebrations, symbolising the beginning of a historic milestone in the Club's journey.



Honouring Mr. Umesh Zirpe

Day 1 Summary

The inaugural day successfully celebrated achievements in mountaineering, honoured distinguished personalities, promoted Himalayan literature, and highlighted remarkable expeditions. The Programme reflected The Himalayan Club's tradition of recognising excellence while inspiring participants through stories of courage, exploration, and lifelong dedication to the mountains.

Day 2 Report

Sunday, 22 March 2026

Theme: Stories, Responsibility & Community

The second day centered on sharing experiences from the Himalaya, encouraging responsible mountaineering, and strengthening the sense of community among climbers and outdoor enthusiasts. Through lectures, discussions, and film presentations, the programme emphasised learning, safety, environmental awareness, and the human stories behind exploration.

1. Arrival & Gathering

The day began with participants assembling at the venue, providing an opportunity for informal interactions before the commencement of the formal sessions.

2. Welcome & Setting the Tone

Speaker: Divyesh Muni

Designation: Vice-President

Divyesh Muni formally welcomed participants and outlined the objectives of the second day's programme. His address emphasised the importance of knowledge sharing, responsible exploration, and preserving the Himalayan environment for future generations.

3. Arun Samant Lecture

Speaker: Kuntal Joisher

The Arun Samant Lecture featured accomplished mountaineer Kuntal Joisher, who shared valuable experiences from high-altitude expeditions. The lecture explored preparation, endurance, leadership, and lessons learned from climbing some of the world's highest peaks.



Arun Samant Lecture

Choosing the Wrong Mountain

In one of the festival's most thought-provoking presentations, Kuntal Joisher challenged many of the assumptions surrounding the world's highest peak. Rather than celebrating Everest as the ultimate mountaineering objective, he reflected on how his own perspective changed after climbing the mountain twice—first via the South Col route from Nepal and later via the North Col route in Tibet.

Drawing from his personal experiences, Joisher described the immense preparation, hardship and logistical complexity involved in both expeditions. While reaching the summit of Everest remains an extraordinary achievement, he observed that the mountain has increasingly become part of a highly organised commercial enterprise have transformed the climb into a structured operation, making it significantly different from the exploratory expeditions of the past.

Joisher noted that Everest has evolved into a global symbol of success, attracting climbers seeking personal achievement, public recognition or professional distinction. This widespread appeal has created a thriving commercial ecosystem, enabling many aspiring climbers to attempt the peak with sufficient financial resources and organised support, often resulting in crowded routes during favourable weather windows.

While acknowledging Everest's historic significance and the dedication required to climb it, Joisher questioned whether its popularity has overshadowed the qualities that traditionally define mountaineering—exploration, self-reliance, solitude and discovery.

His own outlook changed after both Everest expeditions. Instead of pursuing increasingly famous peaks, he turned towards remote and lesser-known mountains where there were no established routes, fixed infrastructure or guarantees of success. These unclimbed or rarely visited summits rekindled the spirit of exploration, where every decision demanded careful judgement and the greatest rewards came from venturing into the unknown.

The lecture concluded with a powerful message: true success in mountaineering is not defined by climbing the world's most famous mountain, but by choosing objectives that inspire curiosity, test one's abilities and preserve the enduring spirit of adventure.

4. Ladakh Mountain Guides

Speaker: Skalzang Rigzin

Skalzang Rigzin provided valuable insights into the role of local mountain guides in Ladakh. The presentation highlighted indigenous knowledge, mountain safety, expedition logistics, and the essential contribution of local communities to successful Himalayan expeditions.

5. Lunch

A lunch break provided delegates with additional opportunities to interact, exchange experiences, and continue discussions initiated during the morning sessions.

6. Book Event for “Across the Himalaya” by Vineeta Muni

Nandini Purandare In conversation with Vineeta Muni



This engaging session celebrated the launch of *Across the Himalaya*, a deeply personal memoir by Vineeta Muni recounting the historic 1997 all-women traverse of the Himalaya. The all women expedition began with undertaking an extraordinary 4,500-kilometre, 198-day journey from Arunachal Pradesh to the Karakoram Pass, crossing three countries and numerous high mountain passes. As the expedition progressed, Vineeta Muni continued the journey with two fellow climbers, embracing a slower and more immersive exploration of the Himalaya. Through conversation with Nandini Purandare, the audience gained insight into the challenges, resilience, friendships, and personal transformation that shaped this remarkable expedition, making the book both a significant contribution to Himalayan literature and an inspiring account of one of the first women's traverses of the Himalayan range.

7. Panel Discussion

Topic: Because the Mountain Has the Final Say: Risks & Responsibilities in Himalayan Climbing



Skalzang Rigzin speaking on the topic

Panelists:

- Divyesh Muni
- Skalzang Rigzin
- Kuntal Joisher

Moderator: Dr. Ravi Mariwala

One of the festival's most engaging sessions, the panel discussion addressed the realities of mountaineering, focusing on risk management, decision-making, ethical climbing practices, environmental responsibility, and the importance of respecting the unpredictable nature of the mountains.

8. High Tea

Participants enjoyed refreshments while continuing conversations with speakers, panellists, and fellow mountaineers.

9. Film Screening

Film: Big Walls and Bedtime Stories

The audience viewed an inspiring film that celebrated adventure, perseverance, and the spirit of climbing, offering visual insights into life on the world's great mountain walls.

10. Sir Chris Bonington: The Mountaineer

Speakers:

- Harish Kapadia
- Sir Chris Bonington

The festival concluded with an extraordinary and memorable session featuring renowned mountaineering historian Harish Kapadia in conversation with legendary British mountaineer Sir Chris Bonington. Widely regarded as one of the greatest mountaineers of the modern era, Sir Chris reflected on more than six decades of exploration, leadership, and pioneering expeditions across the Himalaya and other great mountain ranges. His accounts of climbing, expedition leadership, and the evolution of mountaineering offered invaluable lessons to both experienced climbers and young adventurers.



Sir and Lady Bonington with Shri Harish Kapadia

The session held special significance as Sir Chris travelled to India to be part of the festival at the remarkable age of 91, demonstrating his enduring passion for the mountains and his long-standing association with The Himalayan Club and the Indian mountaineering community. His warmth, humility, and willingness to share stories from a lifetime of exploration captivated the audience and made the session one of the defining highlights of the festival. His presence was not only a privilege for attendees but also a fitting tribute to a lifetime dedicated to advancing the spirit of adventure, exploration, and mountaineering across the world.

Day 2 Summary

The second day concluded the festival on a thoughtful and inspiring note by focusing on storytelling, responsible adventure, environmental stewardship, and community engagement. Through expert lectures, meaningful

discussions, and inspiring presentations, participants gained valuable insights into the evolving world of Himalayan exploration while reaffirming the shared responsibility of protecting the mountains for future generations.

Overall Conclusion

The Annual Adventure Festival 2026 successfully fulfilled its objective of celebrating mountaineering excellence while fostering learning, inspiration, and collaboration within the Himalayan community. Over two days, the festival honoured distinguished achievers, recognised outstanding literature and exploration, encouraged meaningful dialogue on responsible climbing, and celebrated the enduring spirit of the Himalaya. The event further reinforced The Himalayan Club's legacy as one of India's foremost institutions dedicated to the promotion of mountaineering, exploration, and Himalayan heritage.

Mumbai Office opening

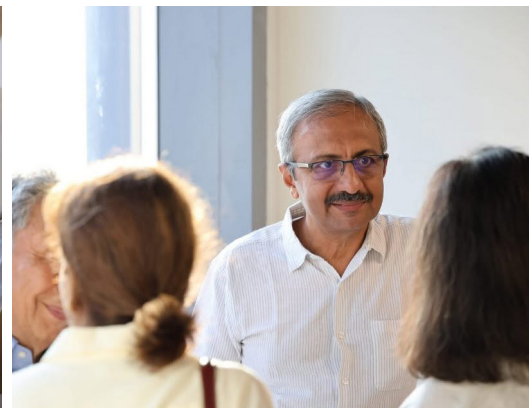
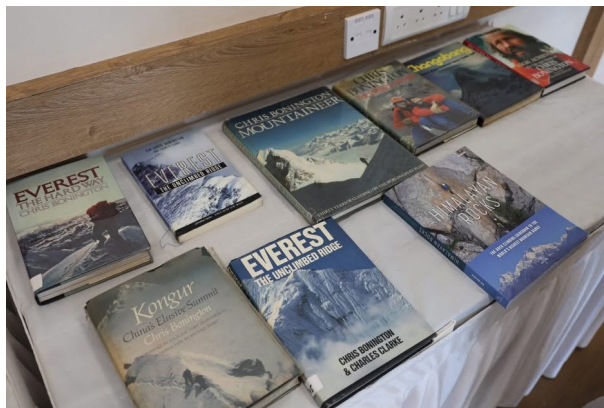
The Himalayan Club just got a new altitude, 31 floors up.

Our new office-cum-library at 3101, Prestige Turf Tower, C Wing, Dr E Moses Road, Mahalaxmi West, Mumbai was inaugurated by none other than Sir Chris Bonington in presence of guests and members

A space with a curated Himalayan library, quiet corners to read, and room to plan your next journey, all set high above the city.



THE HIMALAYAN CLUB E-LETTER VOLUME 49



IMF Mountain Film Festival-India Tour by The Himalayan Club, Bengaluru Section

By Kamalesh Venugopal

A screening of IMF Mountain Film Festival-India Tour 2026 was organised by The Himalayan Club, Bengaluru Section in collaboration with Bangalore International Centre on the Sunday, 19th July 2026.

Nearly 200 participants attended the screening which was organised for the adventure savvy public of Bengaluru. The admission was 'Free Entry' on a first come first serve basis. Mr Keerti Pias, Hon Secretary of IMF participated in the screening along with other invitees from local mountaineering clubs and IMF members.

The event started at 11am with a welcome note and Introduction to IMF, The Himalayan Club and the IMF MFF initiative. This was followed by screening of the following 07 films for over 2 hours:

- 1) Showing Up
- 2) Duchess - Highland Gathering
- 3) Nazia - The shepherdess and her school
- 4) Papsura- Peak of Evil
- 5) Seeing Red - Saving Red Pandas
- 6) Stepping Stone
- 7) Changabang - Return to the shining mountain

The audience enjoyed the films and this was evident from the loud applause after each and every film! Through this Mountain Film Festival, the audience appreciated the breathtaking cinematography, hear inspiring stories of human endurance and celebrated the spirit of adventure that connects us all.

Mr. Keerti Pias addressed the audience after the screening and shared his insights and thoughts on the evolution of IMF MFF and the way forward. to make this a bigger initiative. He also touched upon the support from the IMF for adventure opportunities .

The event concluded at 1:30pm with a Vote of Thanks



Climbs, Treks and Explorations

An Honest Retelling of One of the Year's Best Climbs

By Spencer Gray



Gray on beautiful rock at about 6,000 meters, below the hanging snowfield that separates the south face's serac bands. (Photo: Ryan Griffiths)

I was not expecting so much delight. Ryan Griffiths, Matt Zia, and I had come to the sparsely populated Mugu District in western Nepal to attempt a tall line on the south side of Kaqur Kangri (a.k.a. Kanti Himal, 6,859m), a majestic butte of a peak on the border with Tibet. We had pictures of half the mountain and an old, almost Victorian description of the south face from *The Himalayan Journal*. We would take our best shot at the obvious sharp prow in the photos—the unclimbed southwest arête—but we had a more or less cheerful willingness to fail. We figured we'd get up something or another, and, if nothing else, roustabout for a month in a remote valley that, as far as we knew, hadn't seen climbers in a quarter century.

Matt and I had met in Patagonia in 2016 and climbed in the Chaltén massif, where we discovered a good chemistry. We have since shared the rope in Montana—my home state and where Matt and Ryan both live now—and in India. They are professional guides: ice in winter, alpine rock in the summer, and Ryan in Alaska in the spring. I'm based in

Seattle, work in public policy in the energy sector, and climb when I can.

I approached Matt in March 2024 about returning to the Himalaya, my fifth expedition to the region, and he suggested that Ryan round out our ideal team size. We roped up once as a group, when Matt and Ryan visited me in Squamish. There, we uncovered a shared mid-pitch propensity for breaking into a contagious twang and delivering laconic country wisdom: “You know what they say,” delivered in a deadpan drawl, followed by a pause, “you can’t pickle a possum without gettin’ vinegar on your britches.”

Kaqr Kangri was our preferred kind of objective: high enough to require



Spencer Gray leading the first pitch of Kaqr Kangri's headwall, at 6,500 meters on the southwest arête. Kande Hiunchuli (6,627m) is on the horizon.



Spencer Gray leading the first pitch of Kaqur Kangri's headwall, at 6,500 meters on the southwest arête. Kande Hiunchuli (6,627m) is on the horizon.

extra effort, low enough to still let you reliably pull hard, and relatively off the radar. The southwest arête appeared to stick to the best rock on the south side and mostly avoid the impact zone of two shelves of active seracs that loom over the rest of the south face—one about halfway up, the other just below the summit. It's still hard for me to believe there is a mile-thick hunk of stone that good just sitting out there minding itself, evading the paparazzi.

The mountain is in the far north tip of Shey Phoksundo National Park, which spans a wide range of ecosystems, including the rain shadow north of the Kanjiroba massif. That area includes much of the Kanti

Himal mountains, of which Kaqur Kangri is the most prominent peak. Kaqur was first climbed by a Japanese team from the alpine club of Doshisha University in Kyoto, led by Toyoji Wada, in September 2002. The eightmember team (including three Sherpas) approached from Tibet and summited by the east ridge after fixing lines.

Japanese expeditions from the Osaka Alpine Club had reconnoitered the Nepalese side several years earlier. Sadao Yoshinaga, the leader, described their first view of Kaqur Kangri in 1997, from a border peak to the north, in the 2001 Himalayan Journal (paraphrased slightly): “[A] tall gigantic peak dominating others came into their sight....The shape of the peak was just like a big vaulting box piled up to a 1,000m height with snow and ice.”



Ryan Griffiths at about 6,000 meters, with unnamed and unclimbed Peak 6,226m (6,145m on some maps) in back to the west. (Photo: Spencer Gray)

In 1998, a team of four Japanese and 20 porters hacked through thick shrubbery to reach the south side: “The awful south face of 1,800m high was standing in front of them,” the same article reported. “The south face itself is composed of [a] lower half of rock precipices and upper half of overwhelming hanging glaciers with numerous huge ice cliffs, defending against the raiders into the face.... It seemed to be impossible to find a feasible route to the summit. They tried to seek for [an] alternative route on the east ridge, west face, and northwest ridge. Their hard work of flaky schist and other metamorphic rock were mixed in, sometimes on the same mountain. We kept our hopes in check.

Kaqr is in a tick-list desert. The closest 8,000-meter summit (Dhaulagiri) is almost 90 miles away as the crow flies. Gurla Mandhata (7,694m) is about the same distance in the opposite direction, in Tibet. There are only two 7,000-meter peaks in western Nepal (Api and Saipal). One effect of having few headliners is sparse regional traffic from climbers and trekkers. Reconnaissance reports by Paulo Grobel, Julian Freeman-Atwood, and others have raised western Nepal’s profile in past editions of the AAJ (2015 and 2019, for example), but still relatively few people climb there.

In Kathmandu, en route to our launching point of Gamgadhi, Mugu’s capital, we hired two brothers-in-law, Devendra (Deven) and Buddhi Tamang, as our on-the-ground fixer/translator and camp cook, respectively. They are Tamang Nepalese from a village in the Rolwaling region. Their help was essential while negotiating for mules and supplies, and for navigating the basic local infrastructure.

From Gamgadhi, we walked with nine mules and their handler, Kali, for eight days to base camp, including four days spent improving six miles of an existing path so the mules and their wide loads could pass. This side trail departed the main trail, which connects Mugu and Dolpo, at the Takla Khola, in a Fangorn Forest-like vale of huge Himalayan birches, their trunks bent wildly and leaves yellowing. We continued up a tributary of the Mayongthan Khola and set up base camp in an alpine meadow at 4,700 meters, with a view of the upper third of Kaqr Kangri.

The side trail we improved is used seasonally by hunters and collectors of yarsagumba (*Cordyceps sinensis*). This parasitic fungus grows in some alpine grasslands of the Himalaya out of the heads of infected



Griffiths rappelling the northwest ridge of Kaqur Kangri, with the icefall on the southeast side of Peak 6,226m behind. The team exited to skier's left off the glacier below and rappelled back into the valley of their advanced base camp. (Photo: Spencer Gray)

moth larvae. The fungus fruiting body, attached to the larval corpse, is hand-harvested in late spring, like a tiny carrot, and sold as a prized ingredient in traditional Tibetan and Chinese medicine. It has purported immune-boosting and Viagra-like properties (it has in fact shown promising pharmacological results in preclinical testing). Yarsagumba has been overcollected in many places, damaging local ecosystems like the Takla and Mayongthan valleys, both of which we camped in. The market demand is overwhelming: In recent years, yarsagumba has sold for more than \$20,000 per kilogram in Nepal and makes up more than half

the annual income for some families who collect it.

We would be climbing above a mycological gold rush, with Shey Phoksundo National Park clearly showing the knock-on effects: fire pits, cast-off clothing, playing cards, and hundreds of food wrappers scattered about the larger meadows, which were largely devoid of wildlife. Our first afternoon in base camp, I scooped water out of a pond recharged by a side channel of the river, and then slowly dumped it back out when I noticed a dozen tiny squiggles wriggling out of the sediment, perhaps new settlers left behind by the fungus harvesters.

“Delightful,” I said, turning to Matt and Ryan. “Worms.”

From the moment we scrambled to the base of Kaqur’s south face at 5,200 meters, we could see the rock was excellent. The same high-quality granitic gneiss (so it seemed) that we had found while acclimatizing on a neighboring 6,226-meter peak extended to the summit of Kaqur—information that could only be gleaned in person. Most of the basin and side valleys below Kaqur, apart from discrete contact zones with neighboring schist, seemed to have similar rock. It could have come straight off Mt. Moran in the Tetons.

We spent a week scoping the southwest arête from various angles and at different times of day, formulating our plan for bivouac sites and tactics. In base camp one morning, we saw a giant serac fall from the mountain-top, creating a huge debris zone across the bottom of the south face and confirming our choice to hug the arête. The two biggest puzzles were the middle rock section, with obvious snowcovered ledges but smooth, compact rock in between, and the upper headwall—the steep crown lording over the subrange. We grew convinced that there were enough features to pull it off.

We joked that our basic tactic would be Heavy and Slow, rather than Light and Fast. We each packed 11 pounds of food, plenty for five to seven days. We prioritized selecting the best bivy sites to stay well rested for the upper headwall, the obvious crux, rather than climbing until dark each day to gain meters. We hoped this would give us three relatively flat places to sleep: a thin, shaley ledge, which would probably fit a tent, after we raced up the lower slabs, and the diggable (we hoped) bottom and top of the snowfield separating the headwall from the lower serac band, with a Dyneema ice hammock supplementing whatever

ledges we could chop.

My feet and Ryan's are within one size of each other, so we'd share rock shoes for leading, although we anticipated climbing mostly in boots. To reduce weight, we packed a single synthetic quilt for two people, with a nylon floor that Ryan had sewed on to retain warmth, plus one hoodless sleeping bag. We had a small double rack, with extra pitons and nuts for rappel anchors. Ryan has a taste for homemade metal: I'm still not sure whether he found some of his pitons in a back-alley smithy in Thamel or yanked them off street signs at home in Bozeman.

On day one, October 15, we three soloed about 1,500 feet of fourth- and low-fifth-class ramps and short steps to reach an overhanging chimney at the first cliffband. While an easier path lay through a drainage gully 50 yards right it was exposed to serac fall, whereas the chimney was shielded by a buttress. Ryan led two pitches at stiff 5.10 in the rock shoes, including a laser-cut offwidth that had us laughing in disbelief at its high quality. As we followed, Matt and I skated off overhanging and crimp sections in our double boots.

A couple of hundred feet above was a sloping band of red talus at 5,800 meters, where we stopped for the night after chopping out the frozen ground to fit the tent. The next morning, our MSR Reactor stove (a veteran of several trips at high altitude) failed catastrophically, apparently because of a thermal trip, an internal mechanism to prevent overheating that cannot be field-repaired once triggered. Fortunately, we had



(Photo: Ryan Griffiths)

stashed a spare, if dinky, PocketRocket stove at the base, but getting it would require descending over 600 meters and fixing ropes to facilitate a return trip that same day. We had three more days of a bluebird forecast before an unsettled pattern moved in—losing a whole day could jeopardize this summit window. But no stove, no go. We bit the bullet and spent the day yo-yoing down and back up.

Staying attuned to your own motivations and risk tolerance is the only way to return repeatedly to big-mountain environments. While we were in base camp and acclimatizing, we had received the news that Michael Gardner, a fellow guide and a friend of Matt and Ryan's, had passed away in a fall on Jannu East, in far eastern Nepal. His death deeply affected our team. Now, up on the mountain, Matt was discovering that, at that particular moment, his compass was not pointing toward Kaqur Kangri. I'm grateful that reaching that difficult conclusion deepened rather than strained our friendships. "Would something make the difference to change your mind?" I asked. Matt reflected, quiet, and then replied, "Maybe just time." After we retrieved the spare stove, Matt returned to base camp to explore side valleys and alternative objectives, while Ryan and I continued upward.

To begin our third day, I led perhaps 10 pitches (up to 5.9) in boots, steep and occasionally loose enough to warrant pitching it out. We zigzagged up run-out edges and ledges on a triangular panel at the corner of the west face, pulling through several roofs and stacked blocks that moved us past overhanging cliffs. It was amazingly fun, moderate rock climbing, mostly in the sun in bare hands.

After the surface turned to plastered névé and ice, we put on crampons and Ryan took over for a block. We simulclimbed until sunset, at about 6,200 meters, at the base of the hanging snowfield on the south side of the arête, then hacked out a ledge from bullet ice. The first serac band was now below us.

The next day, Ryan led a simul block up solid névé with small penitentes glued to blue ice, just to the right of the plunging edge of the arête. Our calves burned. At the top of the snowfield, we reached a shallow ice cave at 6,500 meters, with a small rock roof, and enlarged it into a luxurious, flat bivy, right at the base of Kaqur's spectacular crux headwall.

"Morning, sunshine," Ryan said saccharinely, waving at me from the op-

posite corner of the tent. We brewed coffee and watched the distant summits of the Dhaulagiri group glow in the first light.

Kaqr's headwall showed several potential lines. While there seemed to be obvious ledges and corners to the right, they were closer to the upper seracs and had some blank sections. We stuck to the arête, along a semicontinuous weakness.

We had planned to complete the headwall in one long day, but the only appreciable precipitation of the expedition arrived while we were on the crux pitches, with six sticky inches falling over 36 hours. Already-sustained dry-tooling became somewhat more sustained as we swept and blew snow off pick slots and frontpoint divots. We completed the headwall in eight mixed pitches over two days.

To start off, I got lucky with the route's best pitch, a glorious corner that would be a classic at any mixed crag: My bare right hand jammed up gear-swallowing cracks while my left hand threw an ice tool over a series of umbrella bulges of water ice. I could only giggle in the sunshine and shake my head. I said to Ryan, "I think that pitch is in the new Kaya guide to Ouray, isn't it?"

As the weather moved in, I led into twilight on what turned out to be the crux pitch, up 60 feet of offwidth and chimney, with unprotectable ice in the back. The bottom of this feature flared open, with no footholds. We were stuck momentarily. After three abortive free attempts, and not wanting to break my ankles, I hammered in a knifeblade. I could step on it only after chocking my left hand behind an ice jam and cocking a drop-knee. The rest of the pitch ("pretty fucked," Ryan recalled fondly the next morning) required similar scrounging, arm-barring, and tenuous high-steps

I belayed Ryan from a sloping nook beneath another icy chimney and dihedral. After the prior block of leads and five days on the face, I was fried, so when Ryan arrived, he took over digging most of the bivy. A sharp piece of ice sliced the tensioned ice hammock as we loaded it. Then one of our tent poles snapped. But we still had enough room to curl tightly on our sides.

Ryan led the next day, clawing his way with occasional aid up two overhanging, brittle pitches of ice and then traversing around a final overhang. We exited the headwall on a ramp of moderate water ice, in light

snowfall and heavy spindrift, and camped on the summit plateau. It was -5°F, and the wind blew steadily at about 25 mph all night.

On the morning of October 21, we left our packs and walked for an hour in sunshine up the snowy summit ridge, reaching the top on our seventh day on the mountain, most likely only the second team of climbers to stand there. The edge of Indian Kumaon, nearby Tibet, and central Nepal defined the horizon. For 10 brief minutes, we savored this very involved approximation of walking on the moon and then began our descent.

We reached the base in one day via the northwest ridge and a west-facing slope below the north col, mostly downclimbing and making about a dozen rappels. This descent line would make a lovely fast ascent in the right conditions.

Matt, a mensch, left a headlamp lit for us at the base and waited all evening to meet us with extra food. Two days later, six mules returned to base camp and we all started walking out.

Objectives like the southwest arête of Kaqur Kangri used to be what most climbing was: trying something kind of hard, an inconvenient distance from home, and relying on imagination as much as effort to turn a thing dreamt into a thing done. There are still plenty of places to contrive that same experience. We just have to look harder—and be willing to court risk in an unpredictable operating environment.

Our team didn't have what we'd consider a close call, but in debriefing, I still counted 23 discrete times when the risk ticked up. A mule nearly broke my knee with a kick when I tried to bring it into camp one morning. On our first day of climbing, we hustled up a ramp that was probably at the outside edge of the ricochet zone of the upper serac band. Two days later, Ryan and I both simultaneously realized that we were pushing our unroped luck on low-angle but hard-frozen talus above the west face. "If we slip here, it's to the bottom, eh?" I said.

Of four minor rockfall incidents, we mitigated two by our choice of protected belays and bivvies. Another was friendly fire: On rappel, I chucked a baseball-sized rock so the ropes wouldn't dislodge it. But I misaimed, and the rock bounced down the snow slope and nailed Ryan in the shoulder. I reasoned that Ryan had probably done something in a prior life to deserve getting punched in the clavicle. He was less sure.

On day three, below the snowfield, we pulled through suspended, stacked blocks in a roof that would have chopped the rope had they dislodged. On the upper headwall, my ice tool tethers got tangled behind a cam after I had campused out a diagonal rail. I couldn't reverse the move, and I couldn't continue until I had unthreaded the tools. Half growling, half screaming, I locked off on one arm, frontpoints screeching, and freed myself. When he followed, Ryan simply lowered out and juggled.

On the descent, Ryan and I had probably our riskiest moment when we crossed a 40-foot-wide wind slab partway down the upper northwest face. It appeared suddenly, a shallow pocket of cross-loaded danger in an otherwise stable snowpack. The tension on the slope and the soft, hollow thump as our boots and ice tools pressed through the snow put us both on edge. But with no other signs of failure or propagation, and a morning of downclimbing a similar aspect and angle above us, we each judged it safe enough to proceed.

An hour before we regained the base of the mountain, fed up with navigating the messy corners of the final glacier, we briefly but obtusely committed to soloing steep glacial ice, embedded with crushed pebbles, as we traversed 15 feet above the bottom of a closed crevasse. We were spurred on by Matt's tiny light in the distance and the promise of fresh Snickers. Perhaps a week on the mountain and the tedious descent had dulled our nose for risk.

Three days later, we stopped at Chyargo La on the trek back out and took in our final view of Kaqur. I crouched beneath fluttering prayer flags to lounge against a rock, my fingers getting sticky pulling globs of gulab jamun out of a can we'd saved until now for a treat. Kaqur's summit seracs glinted in the mid-day sun from what seemed like a very long ways away. Matt and Ryan laughed as I passed them the can for a shot of syrup to wash it all down.

Summary: First ascent of the Southwest Arête of Kaqur Kangri (6,859m, 29.766N, 82.750E), Mugu District, Nepal, by Spencer Gray and Ryan Griffiths, with support from Matt Zia. The ascent (1,670m, ED+ M7 WI5 A0, with 5.10 rock and steep snow) was from October 15 to 21, 2024, with descent via the northwest ridge on the final day.

*2025 Awarded ascent -PioletS d'Or
Courtesy- American Alpine Journal 2025*

2025 Awarded ascents
Yashkuk Sar (6,667m)



First ascent of Yashkuk Sar, Batura Muztagh, via the north pillar-Tiger Lily Buttress (2,000m, AI5+ M6 A0), September 19–23. Traversed the mountain and descended by the upper west face and lower north face.

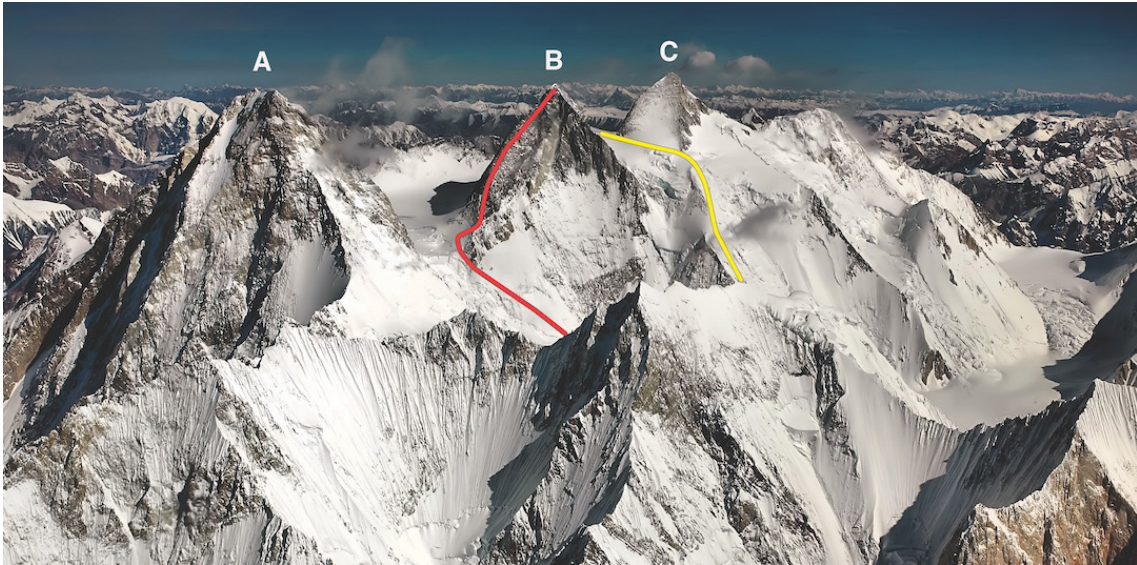
The little visited Yashkuk Yaz Glacier provided Americans August Franzen, Dane Steadman, and Cody Winckler with the location for their first trip to the Karakoram. Despite the short approach, access is via the Chapursan Valley close to the border with Afghanistan, and on occasions permission has been denied. Prior to the American visit only three parties are known to have climbed from the upper Yashkuk Yaz Glacier, ascending a handful of peaks, the last in 2006. The glacier rises south to a watershed ridge with the Karambar Glacier, where a standout objective is 6,667m Yashkuk Sar I, its north pillar rising a full 2,000m from the West Yashkuk Yaz Glacier.

After establishing an advanced camp on this upper glacier, Franzen, Steadman, and Winckler first climbed a ca 5,300m subsidiary summit of an unnamed 6,084m peak to the north, before making a new route from the southeast on nearby Sax Sar (6,240m, climbed once before from the Karambar). They now felt ready for Yashkuk Sar I, and on September 19 began climbing the hopefully safe haven of the north pillar, the faces to either side regularly swept by large serac avalanches. The first two days were mostly steep ice and snow, with exposed, difficult-to-arrange, bivouacs at 5,600m and 5,900m. On the second of these they witnessed their proposed line - a steep dièdre through the headwall - swept by a huge collapsed mushroom. Failure seemed imminent but the next morning, after a diagonal rappel left, they were able to reach, then start up an alternative line on the left edge of the headwall, stopping part way up at 6,200m to make the "airiest bivouac of our lives". On the 22nd, hard mixed terrain and surreal snow formations led to the summit ridge, where a luxury crevasse afforded a flat bivouac.

Next day, the summit was quickly reached and a descent made by rappelling 600m in a couloir on the west face, then a traverse back over the west ridge to downclimb and rappel the lower 1,000m of the north face, reaching the main glacier that night. They have named their route Tiger Lily Buttress.

The jury was full of praise for this highly committing ascent and descent, and the young team, who embody the spirit of alpinism, searching journals and earth imagery for far-away objectives that push the boundaries of both technical difficulty and exploration.

Gasherbrum III (7,952m)



First ascent of the west ridge of Gasherbrum III, Baltoro Muztagh, via Edge of Entropy (nearly 3,000m base camp to summit), July 31-August 4. Traversed mountain by descending east face and then the normal route (southwest ridge) of Gasherbrum II.

Before August 1975, Gasherbrum III, 48m short of 8,000m, was the highest unclimbed mountain in the world. That month the summit was reached by four members of a Polish expedition. The British mountaineer Alison Chadwick, her Polish husband Janusz Onyszkiewicz, Wanda Rutkiewicz, and Krzysztof Zdzitowiecki, climbed the standard Austrian Route on Gasherbrum II as

far as 7,400m. They then traversed below the summit pyramid to reach a high cwm between Gasherbrums II and III, from where they climbed a steep couloir splitting the southeast face of Gasherbrum III. It remains the highest mountain first ascended by women climbers.

Until 2024, there had only been one other ascent – in 2004 by a Basque pair that repeated the original route. However, less known and somewhat underrated was a spirited attempt on the west ridge in 1985 by the British alpinists Geoff Cohen and Des Rubens. From a previously stocked snow cave above the dangerous icefall at 6,900m, they climbed the ridge to 7,400m,

bivouacked, then left their gear and set off for the summit. The wind was fierce and the difficulties higher up proved harder than anticipated. At around 7,700m, with time running out and the prospect of an open biv-

ouac with no equipment unthinkable, they retreated.

Fierce winds also presented a major problem to Aleš Česen (Slovenia) and Tom Livingstone (UK) when they went to attempt the ridge in 2022, forcing them to opt for an alternative plan and try the more sheltered northwest face. They were unsuccessful in this, but far more fortunate when they returned to the mountain two years later for another attempt on the west ridge. The pair made three acclimatization climbs, on the last spending a night at 7,000m. They then left base camp on July 31, and two days later regained the 7,000m camp below the start of the west ridge. Next morning they set off up the ridge, stopping for the first night at a little below 7,500m, and for the second at around 7,800m. Unable to erect a tent at the upper site, they were forced into an open sitting bivouac. They then bypassed the headwall via difficult climbing, possibly up to M6 on one pitch, reached the summit, and then descended the original route on the far side of the mountain. After a night spent at Camp 4 (7,400m) on the standard route to Gasherbrum II, base camp was regained on August 6.

The jury felt this to be a long, difficult and committing route on a rarely visited mountain only fractionally below 8,000m. In addition, it was climbed in a light alpine style by a team of two, and a logical descent made of the opposite side of the mountain - a good example that quality adventure over new ground is still possible on the world's highest mountains.

2025 Special Mention for Female Mountaineering



This Special Mention is intended specifically to promote female alpinism. It recognises a remarkable all-female ascent from the previous year, or a female alpinist for several achievements in the previous year(s), or a female alpinist's career. It is intended to be a first step: the format will evolve according to feedback gained over the next few years.

Lalung I (6,243m), Indian Himalaya

First ascent of Lalung I (6,243m), Zaskar Region, via the east ridge - Here Comes the Sun (2,000m of climbing, M6+ AI5+) - September 9-14. Traversed the mountain and descended by the west ridge and north face.

The Lalung Valley rises southwest from the Suru River, a little to the southeast of the more famous peaks of Nun and Kun. At its head lie Chiling I and II, and Lalung I, II and III, which are located at the boundaries of the Zaskar and Kishtwar regions. The climbing history of the area is only roughly documented, and until recently a plethora of confusing names and altitudes have been granted erroneously to many of the peaks, features, and valleys. However, one thing is clear: before 2024

none of the Lalung peaks had received a documented ascent.

In September 2024, having established an advanced base camp in the valley at 4,800m, Slovenians Anja Petek and Patricija Verdev, part of a four-member female expedition, climbed the sharp and difficult east ridge of Lalung I over a period of five days, one and a half of these pinned inside their tent due to bad weather. On their final evening, a little below the summit, they lost tent poles to the wind and spent the night in bivouac sacs. The following morning's mist made it hard to navigate the remaining terrain, but they reached the summit at 9 a.m. on the 14th. The pair then made a long descent on the crest of the west ridge before making five rappels on the north face to reach the Lalung Glacier at 6:30 p.m. Here, they opted to continue down to advanced base, which took a further eight hours.

Descending to what they presumed was a tranquil base camp, Petek and Verdev discovered their time away had been far from a relaxed experience for their resident compatriots. The camp had been forced to deal with almost nightly visits from bears that ripped or demolished tents and stole much of the food.

The Piolets d'Or jury and technical committee chose Lalung I for this year's Special Mention for Female Alpinism, recognizing an exploratory first ascent of a 6,000m peak in a little visited area, a full traverse of the mountain, a pure alpine style ascent over technical ground, and a strong level of commitment, particularly when crossing the summit in poor weather. All these attributes fit wonderfully with the values of the Piolets d'Or, and the ascension of Lalung I will hopefully provide a fine inspiration for female alpinists.

Courtesy-Piolets d'Or

News

History is shaped by persistence.



13 Days. 3 Summits. 1 Historic Season.

History is shaped by persistence. Today, we celebrate as Purnima Shrestha officially receives her Guinness World Record certificate for her performance during the 2024 climbing season.

The official record: Most Ascents of Everest in One Season by a Woman. Purnima reached the summit of Mount Everest three times within a 13-day window:

- May 12, 2024: First Summit
 - May 19, 2024: Second Summit
 - May 25, 2024: Third Summit (Record Secured)
- Originally a photojournalist, Purnima is now a decorated Guinness World Record holder. For the current Spring 2026 season, she has transitioned into a new professional role as an Expedition Leader on Mount Everest.
- Beyond the Record:
- Purnima has successfully summited 8 of the world's 14 highest peaks, reaching several significant milestones for Nepal:
- Mount Everest (8,848m): 5 Total Summits (2018, 2024 x3, 2025).
 - K2 (8,611m): Successfully summited in 2023.
 - Dhaulagiri (8,167m) & Annapurna I (8,091m): Part of the first group of Nepali women to reach these summits in 2021.
 - Manaslu (8,163m): Summited in 2017 and again in 2024.
 - The 22-Day Triple Header: During the 2022 season, she reached the

summits of Kanchenjunga (May 5), Lhotse (May 16), and Makalu (May 27) within a 22-day period.

Purnima's journey illustrates that ambitious goals are attainable through consistent dedication and resolve. She remains an inspiration for the mountaineering community in Nepal and beyond.

Courtesy-Bidmytrip

Survey finds wild cats at record heights

Nabarun Guha



One of the most elusive small cats, Pallas's cat, was photographed for the first time as part of a survey in Arunachal Pradesh.

The survey also recorded the presence of five other wild cats at heights above 4200 metres above sea level, indicating the landscape's unique wild cat diversity at high elevations.

The first documented evidence of the Pallas's cat in Arunachal Pradesh is a milestone for wildlife research in the eastern Himalayas, say experts, highlighting that the findings reaffirm the state's importance as a global biodiversity hotspot and highlight the need for continued investment in scientific monitoring and conservation.

The Pallas's cat (*Otocolobus manul*), one of the most elusive small cats, was photographed for the first time in Arunachal Pradesh. Its documentation in the northeast Indian state extends the species' known range in the eastern Himalayas, beyond earlier confirmed records from Sikkim in India, Bhutan, and eastern Nepal.

The photographic evidence is from a wildlife survey conducted by



The Pallas's cat was photographed for the first time in Arunachal Pradesh during a survey conducted by WWF-India in 2024. The survey also documented the highest elevation records for other wild cats, like common leopard, marbled cat and snow leopard. Image courtesy of WWF-India.

WWF-India in 2024, the results of which were released last month. The survey also recorded the presence of five other wild cats — snow leopard, common leopard, clouded leopard, leopard cat, and marbled cat — all at an altitude above 4,200 metres, at some of the highest elevations recorded for some of these cat species.

The WWF-India survey was conducted with support from the Forest Department, Government of Arunachal Pradesh and the local communities, under its project to revive trans-Himalayan rangelands.

Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu celebrated this discovery of Pallas's Cat with a post on social media.



Sela pass, which lies between West Kameng and Tawang districts. In 2024, WWF-India deployed 136 camera traps across high-altitude rangelands of both districts. The researchers trekked through extreme weather and steep terrain with the help of local guides and community members. Representative image by Abhishek Gaurav via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Ngilyang Tam, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) & the Chief Wild Life Warden (Wildlife and Biodiversity), Arunachal Pradesh said, “The discovery of Pallas’s cat in Arunachal Pradesh is a milestone for wildlife research in the eastern Himalayas. These findings reaffirm the state’s importance as a global biodiversity hotspot and highlight the need for continued investment in scientific monitoring and conservation. The active participation of herders and villagers demonstrates that conservation, traditional knowledge, and their livelihoods can go hand in hand in protecting our fragile mountain ecosystems.”

Species found at high elevations

As part of the survey, between July and September 2024, WWF-India deployed 136 camera traps in 83 locations across 2,000 sq km of rugged high-altitude rangelands in West Kameng and Tawang districts, making it one of their most extensive wildlife monitoring exercises, according to a press release by WWF-India. “The survey involved meticulous planning and days of trekking through remote, high-altitude areas, where

extreme weather, rugged and steep terrain, logistical hurdles and limited accessibility made the field work challenging. The camera traps were kept active for over eight months, often in extreme weather and remote, difficult-to-access terrain. The participation and partnership with local guides and community members enabled the team to overcome these challenges,” the press release stated.

The survey documented the highest elevation records for several species — common leopard (*Panthera pardus*) at 4,600 metres above sea level (masl), the clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*) at 4,650 masl, marbled cat (*Pardofelis marmorata*) at 4,326 masl, Himalayan wood owl (*Strix niviculum*) at 4,194 masl, and grey-headed flying squirrel (*Petaurista caniceps*) at 4,506 masl. The elevation records documented for the common leopard, clouded leopard, marbled cat, Himalayan wood owl, and grey-headed flying squirrel were the highest in India to date and may exceed previously known global elevation limits, WWF-India wrote in the press release.

“The discovery of Pallas’s cat in Arunachal Pradesh at nearly 5,000 metres is a powerful reminder of how little we still know about life in



*Aside from wild cats, the survey by WWF-India also documented the highest elevation record for the grey-headed flying squirrel (*Petaurista caniceps*) at 4,506 masl. Representative image by Sun Jiao via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).*

the high Himalayas,” wrote Rishi Kumar Sharma, Head for Science and Conservation, Himalayas Programme, WWF-India in an email to Mongabay India, explaining the significance of recording Pallas’s cat in Arunachal Pradesh. “That a landscape can support snow leopards, clouded leopards, marbled cats, and now Pallas’s cat alongside vibrant pastoral traditions speaks to its extraordinary richness and resilience. These findings highlight why community-led conservation, grounded in science and local knowledge, is indispensable for securing the future of our fragile rangelands.”

Talking about the purpose of the survey, Sharma said, “The survey was designed as part of a broader, landscape-scale effort to assess mammalian biodiversity across high-altitude habitats of Western Arunachal Pradesh with the core focus on estimating population-density of snow leopards. We used systematic camera-trap surveys across multiple grids to document presence and relative abundance of different species, while also generating data to inform future conservation planning in this little-studied region. We have a long term research and conservation program in the West Kameng and Tawang districts and have been studying high-altitude wildlife for over five years now.”

The grumpy cat

The sighting of Pallas’s cat was at an altitude that is little lower than the highest altitude ever recorded for the species (~5,050 m above sea level). Known as the “grumpy cat” because of its appearance, this cold-adapted wild cat is one of the most elusive, rarely photographed and therefore remains one of the least studied feline species.

Speaking on previous reports of Pallas’s cat in Arunachal Pradesh, Sharma said, “To our knowledge, there has been no prior photographic documentation of Pallas’s cat from Arunachal Pradesh. Historical records from India are extremely scarce and often anecdotal, with most confirmed sightings and research coming from the higher altitudes of Ladakh and surrounding trans-Himalayan regions. This makes the photographic evidence from Arunachal a significant range extension record for the species within the Indian Himalaya.”

Elaborating on the probable prey of Pallas’s cat, he said, “At the elevations where we documented Pallas’s cat (3,500–5,000 m), the likely

prey base consists of small mammals such as pika (*Ochotona* spp.), woolly hare (*Lepus oiostolus*), and various voles. Ground-nesting birds can also be important seasonally. These prey species are abundant in alpine meadows and shrub-steppe habitats, which Pallas's cats are well-adapted to exploit."

Pastoral traditions enabling coexistence

The survey also captured images of the Brokpa herding community and their livestock. This documentation, notes the WWF-India press release, underscores centuries-old pastoral traditions that have enabled coexistence between people and wildlife in these high-altitude rangelands.

Speaking to Mongabay India about the Brokpa community, Sharma said, "The Brokpa are an ethnolinguistic community inhabiting high-altitude villages of West Kameng and Tawang districts in Arunachal Pradesh. They are estimated to number around 5,000-6,000 people in India. Traditionally semi-nomadic yak and sheep herders, their livelihoods are deeply tied to high-altitude pastures. Today, many continue to practice transhumance, moving livestock seasonally, though younger generations increasingly engage in agriculture, small trade, and wage labor with the General Reserve Engineering Force (GREF)."

Commenting on the relationship of the Brokpa community with local wildlife, he said, "The Brokpa maintain a close, and often positive, relationship with local wildlife. On the one hand, predators such as snow leopards and wild dogs occasionally take livestock, creating conflict. On the other hand, their pastoral lifestyle and customary institutions contribute to the maintenance of extensive rangeland ecosystems that also support wild herbivores and carnivores. Through our work, we have sought to document not only the wildlife of this landscape but also the lived realities, traditional knowledge, and cultural values of the Brokpa, which are central to any long-term conservation effort in these fragile highlands."

Courtesy-Mongabay India

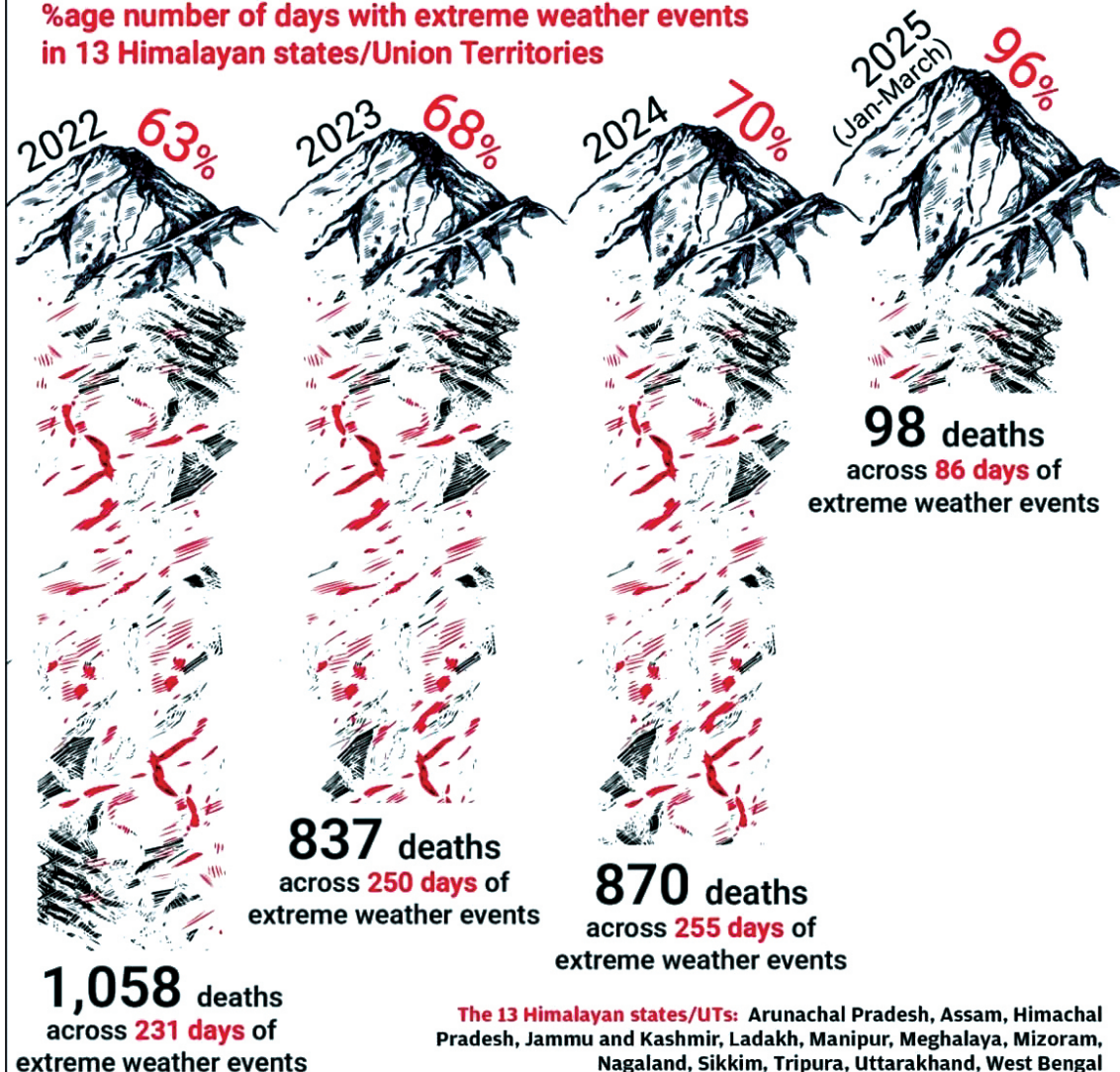
Thought To Ponder Upon

CSE | DOWN TO EARTH
DATA CENTRE

Crumbling Himalayas

In just over three years (Jan 2022–Mar 2025), the fragile Himalayan region saw extreme weather events on 822 of 1,186 days—that's nearly 7 out of every 10 days.
They killed 2,863 people across 13 states and UTs.

**%age number of days with extreme weather events
in 13 Himalayan states/Union Territories**



Analysis: Kiran Pandey and Rajit Sengupta

Data: India's Atlas on Weather Disasters, CSE-DTE Data Centre

From Joshimath to Zojila—how Indians are loving the Himalayas to death. Literally

Karajeet Kaur hobe



The tourist, however, is only the easiest to scapegoat, and the most visible link in this chain—not the most consequential | PTI

The last thing that the seven people who died in the avalanche at Zojila Pass on 27 March would have seen was the sunshine. It was the sunshine, in fact, that killed them.

Midday warmth is known to loosen the snowpack above the Srinagar-Leh highway, sending it down the slopes. It's also well-known that March is an avalanche-prone month and that the early morning hours, up to 10 am, are generally considered safer than afternoons. The avalanche that occurred between 12.30 pm and 1 pm bore down on a mix of heavy and light vehicles, even though advisories suggest that heavy vehicles be allowed only after light ones. Among the dead is a 10-year-old child, while a search for two more missing people continues.

In about four weeks, the avalanche will be all but forgotten. The Indian summer will be upon us, and schools will break for the annual vacation. Hours will pass in the delirious search for finding a homestay at the last possible village in Uttarakhand or Himachal. The season must go on, because #TheMountainsAreCalling. What is the death of seven people, when thousands of lives have been lost in the last few years?

Strain on the mountains

For generations, India's northern states were a salubrious escape from the hellish summer of the plains. As the tourism sector evolved over the last 25 years, and 4×4 road journeys along sleek, many-laned highways replaced sleepy train rides, access to the Himalayas exploded in an unprecedented way. But for the last several years, the mountains have been sounding the alarm bells – in the form of landslides, flash floods, waste and water-management crises. But none of the bad news seems to dent the tourist enthusiasm.

Take Uttarakhand's Joshimath, for instance. The culturally significant historical town is the gateway to several religious and tourist sites, like Hemkund Sahib and Auli. In 2023, 700 buildings developed cracks and became unfit for residence. The town, situated on debris left by ancient landslides, also began to sink.

But this wasn't the first time Joshimath was under the microscope. Cracks in its houses first appeared in the 1960s. In 1976, a state committee recommended that blasting of boulders be immediately stopped, a pucca drainage system be developed, and chopping trees be banned to prevent landslides.

Joshimath, however, is now filled with luxury hotels.

By 2023, the town's slow-motion sinking had become a cautionary tale about what unscientific construction on unstable mountain terrain actually looks like. By the following summer, the cautionary tale had vaporised, and the Char Dham Yatra—whose infrastructure expansion is one of the reasons geologists have been alarmed about these valleys for years—drew more than 50 lakh pilgrims. In 2012, that number was 4.5 lakh.

Religious tourism is only one part of the immense strain on the mountains. During peak season last year, 67 per cent of Himalayan tourist destinations had to ration water for residents to ensure the hotels stayed supplied. The average tourist in the mountains consumes between 150 and 200 litres of water a day, while the average local uses between 30 and 40. In Shimla, last June, 15,000 vehicles entered the city in a single day, even though its parking infrastructure can accommodate only 5,000.

The tourist, however, is only the easiest to scapegoat, and the most visible link in this chain—not the most consequential.

Never-ending development

The expansion of India's highway network into the Himalayas has been one of the more momentous infrastructure projects of the last two decades. The Himalayas are geologically young mountains, their rock masses highly fractured and prone to failure under the kind of stress that road-building introduces. Slopes are routinely excavated at near-vertical angles to save costs and space, destabilising the hillside.

The effects of this destabilisation are often seen only years later, maybe in a sinking village or a landslide following a mild shower.

The original cost of the Parwanoo-Solan four-lane project was Rs 934 crore in 2015. However, as this report clarifies, 'by 2022 repeated landslides led to an escalation of costs by 65 per cent, to Rs 1,541 crore'. In February 2023, the NHAI had to release a tender for Rs 122 crore for "slope protection work" at 32 locations along the route. The road that was built to open up the mountains is now, at considerable public expense, being protected from the mountains it opened up.

But the uninterrupted march of development carries on. None of these calamities has prompted a rethinking of the model.

Sanjay Austa, a former journalist who runs the Meena Bagh homestays in Himachal Pradesh, describes watching Chandratal, in Spiti Valley—once only accessible by a demanding trek—get a road. "Some areas should be untouched," Austa said during an interview. "Chandratal remains one of my best trekking adventures because I had to work hard to get to a place of beauty. How else will you value that place?"

But the operating ideology that accessibility is an unqualified good and that no peak should be beyond reach turns the mountains into something to be consumed rather than reckoned with. It is an ideology with powerful political backing. Austa, citing the example of Hatu Peak, says that we have to make peace with the fact that not all places can be accessible to all people. Austa also has to sometimes turn down visitors with mobility issues, because the property, set in a permaculture organic orchard, can be reached only via a short trek.

'Valley cannot accommodate a lot of people'

Meena Bagh is built around a traditional kaathkuni structure, a technique of layering wood and stone, without mortar, that produced structures so well-suited to the terrain that they were naturally earthquake-resistant. For

generations, a kaathkuni structure was inherently eco-friendly—but that dynamic completely changes when you expand that aesthetic into a full-scale hotel.

The problem, as Austa points out with some weariness, is that a commercial kaathkuni hotel employs enormous quantities of deodar wood. Each of those trees takes two hundred years to reach maturity. “The kaathkuni is now a brand strategy for most commercial establishments,” Austa said. “But building these at scale only encourages illegal mining and tree-felling.”

Meena Bagh, thankfully, hasn’t had to deal with cataclysmic ecological disasters, but the effects of climate change are all too visible. Austa talks about the disappearance of amphibians from the farm around Ratnari, frogs and toads that once kept the beetle and slug population in check. Without them, pest pressure has exploded, and farmers have responded with pesticides, which have further decimated the bird populations that might otherwise have helped. The Himalayan bulbul, whose beak is too small for most insects, has adapted by switching to cherries and is now considered a pest itself.

The people who live in the mountains, too, have to do their own share of adapting. Sandhya (name changed), who runs a small homestay in Himachal Pradesh, has watched her valley transform in seven years from a green riverbank into an unbroken line of structures—commercial and residential. “The valley is very narrow and cannot accommodate a lot of people,” she told me. “When we started the homestay, one car would pass by in two days. Now, trucks are carrying construction material all around and I have a layer of dust in the homestay. Growing up, this was unheard of in the hills.”

Sandhya’s village of about 40 houses now has 15 homestays, many built with the help of hefty loans, taken by people who saw the post-Covid-19 tourism boom and moved fast. But the devastating rains and landslides of 2023 and 2025 have struck hard. “One of my staff members lost her house in the 2023 floods,” Sandhya said. “She decided to construct a pucca house after that. Then, in the July 2025 floods, her new house also got washed away.”

Sandhya’s own homestay is under threat: Land surveyors in the area have recommended evacuating the hill because the slope is extremely unstable. “But nobody wants to leave their home. People want to hold on to whatever

they have, despite the risk to life.”

Responsible tourism

The conversation around solutions, when it happens at all, tends to settle on “responsible tourism”. We must travel in smaller groups, we are told, and lower our footprint. Shikha Tripathi, a mountaineer and founder of Snowfox Escapes, a small trekking company, has spent years trying to build exactly this. For years, Tripathi has written about Himalayan trails like the Hampta Pass or the Valley of Flowers, being overwhelmed by trekkers.

“Snowfox was born from this idea of finding solutions to the problems that I saw in the mountains,” she said. “And one of them was this massive annoyance and impact caused by big groups of trekkers that I would come across.”

Tripathi says that there is a massive difference in learning when groups become smaller.

But she is also honest about what the model cannot do. “I don’t know if there’s any tourism model for the Himalayas that is going to be sustainable to match the kind of demand that we have,” she says.

Tripathi knows that any solution will require a hard cap on numbers. “If you want to keep small numbers and low-impact groups, the cost of operating goes up. Now, if we combine it with who really gets to enjoy the mountains — is it someone with a true love for nature or mountains, or is it someone who can afford to pay a small company that is strict on its responsible travel guidelines? I’m still a little divided on how we can get to the right audience without having price as a barrier,” she says.

Responsible tourism, in other words, is largely tourism for those who can afford to be responsible. The mountains are open to everyone, but to love them well comes at a price.

Tripathi has a lovely philosophy, she says the mountains taught her: “See everything as if for the first time, and as if for the last time.” She means it as an instruction in wonder, and a way of staying present in a precious landscape. But in the Himalayas of 2026, with its deadly slopes, the last time is no longer a metaphor. We have loved these mountains so hard and so carelessly that one final, perfect view may be all that remains.

Courtesy-The Print 31st March, 2026

Everest: The crowded crown

Manik Banerjee

A SNARL-UP AT THE SUMMIT

EVEREST: The Pull of the Peak

Height: **8,848.86 m (29,031.7 ft)** – the highest point on Earth

Straddles the border between **Nepal and Tibet (China)**

For many mountaineers, Everest remains the ultimate test of endurance and ambition

Because it's there. George Mallory's famous words still best explain Everest's allure

From Conquest to Commerce:

1920s-1950s Everest drew generations of explorers; many never returned

May 29, 1953: Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay made the first confirmed ascent

1978: Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler made the first ascent without supplemental oxygen

1996: 8 climbers died in a single storm, highlighting the mountain's dangers

2000s onward: What began as an audacious mountaineering challenge has evolved into a thriving industry supported by commercial expedition operators, sophisticated logistics and modern climbing technology.

Everest has been summited **13,000+** times by **7,000+** climbers by 2025

- Permit fees rose from **US\$11,000 to US\$15,000** in 2025
- Typical expedition cost: **US\$40,000-100,000**
- Nepal earned an estimated **US\$7.4 million** in permit fees in 2026

Weather often compresses summit bids into narrow windows

In 1996, 33-36 summit attempts in a day were considered dangerous; it rose tenfold by 2019

2024: Nepal's Supreme Court called for permit limits on Everest

Nepal's Everest permits for foreign climbers rose nearly 30%—from 381 in 2019 to a record 494 in 2026

Altogether **1,008** climbers summited Everest in the spring climbing season this year, surpassing all previous records.

274 climbers scaled Everest via Nepal on **May 20, 2026** – another record.

The previous record was set on May 22, 2019, when **223** climbers summited via Nepal, apart from 113 others via Tibet the same day. **11** climbers died in 2019.

The world's highest garbage dump

- 30-50 tonnes** of trash – oxygen cylinders, tents and ropes – litter Everest
- 12 tonnes** of human waste are left behind annually

Cost of Congestion

- Oxygen levels are only about one-third of those at sea level.
- Long queues increase exposure to:
 - Oxygen depletion
 - Frostbite and hypothermia
 - Altitude sickness
 - Exhaustion during wait and descent
- Congested routes can delay rescue efforts.
- On Everest, climbers often die while waiting and descending**

It was in 1852 that Radhanath Sikdar, the brilliant chief computer of the Survey of India, calculated that Peak XV, situated between Nepal and Tibet, was the highest mountain in the world. The peak was later named Mount Everest after Sir George Everest, the then Surveyor General of India.

It took another 69 years before the first reconnaissance expedition was launched towards this icy giant in 1921. More than three decades later, in 1953, Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary finally stood atop the world's highest peak, creating one of the greatest moments in mountaineering history.

From that historic ascent till 1965, only nineteen climbers from three expeditions had successfully climbed Everest, including nine Indians in the landmark expedition of 1965. The mountain, however, has changed dramatically over the decades.

Till the closing years of the 20th century, Nepal generally allowed only one expedition through a route during a season, while climbing from Tibet remained difficult because of restricted permissions.

Everest was still a dream reserved for highly trained mountaineers.

But the beginning of the twenty-first century transformed the mountain altogether.

Commercial expedition operators and guided climbs opened Everest to a much wider community. Fixed ropes now secure most difficult sections

of the route. Camps are pre-established with logistics, oxygen cylinders and communication systems already in place. Modern ultralight climbing equipment and increasingly accurate weather forecasting further reduced uncertainties.

As a result, Everest became accessible not only to elite climbers but also to ambitious amateurs from across the globe.

For many, standing atop the world's highest point became a symbol of fame, social recognition and personal achievement. In several cases, successful ascents brought sponsorships and publicity. Consequently, many climbers lacking adequate high-altitude experience and physical conditioning began attempting Everest.

At the same time, Nepal's economy grew increasingly dependent on tourism, particularly Himalayan expeditions and trekking. Expedition permits, logistics, accommodation and trekking services generate enormous revenue for the country.

This year alone, Nepal issued more than one thousand permits for Everest. A record 1,008 climbers are believed to have reached the summit this season, including 274 on a single day, May 20. Ninety-five Indian climbers received permits this year, with many successfully summiting.

But the season also witnessed tragedy. Two climbers died during descent because of extreme exhaustion.

The route to Everest's summit, especially above the South Col camp in the "death zone", is exceptionally narrow. Oxygen levels there are dangerously low, and climbers move along fixed ropes, often only in single file.

The result is traffic congestion at extreme altitude.

Photographs emerging from Everest in recent years often resemble queues outside crowded urban transport hubs rather than scenes from the world's highest mountain. Climbers are sometimes forced to wait for hours in freezing temperatures while bottled oxygen slowly drains away.

The danger becomes even greater during descent, when exhaustion has already weakened the body.

Long delays in the death zone increase the risks of hypoxia, frostbite, collapse and death. The massive human presence also threatens the

fragile Himalayan ecosystem, leaving behind waste, discarded oxygen cylinders and environmental damage on the mountain slopes.

The problem worsens because the weather window for summit attempts is usually very short. Every year, meteorological agencies predict only a few suitable days when winds become manageable for summit pushes. Naturally, all expeditions rush to take advantage of the same limited opportunity, leading to dangerous overcrowding.

Colonel Rajneesh Joshi, Principal of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling and an Everest summiteer himself, explains the reasons behind the growing traffic crisis on Everest.

According to him, overcrowding during the short summit weather window creates long queues near crucial sections like the Hillary Step and the summit ridge. Too many climbers attempting the summit simultaneously significantly increases waiting time in the death zone. Inexperienced climbers often move slowly on fixed ropes, creating bottlenecks.

He also points to commercial pressure on expedition operators, many of whom push large groups toward the summit to maximise business success. Since many technical sections permit only single-file movement, even minor delays due to exhaustion, frostbite, or oxygen problems can trigger massive congestion.

The risks, he warns, are severe.

Climbers remain stranded for prolonged periods above 8,000 metres with rapidly depleting oxygen supplies and energy reserves. The congestion substantially increases exposure to hypoxia, frostbite and fatal altitude-related complications.

Experts believe the situation now demands urgent intervention.

Authorities and the international climbing community must introduce stricter regulations on permit numbers and summit scheduling. Prior high-altitude mountaineering experience should become mandatory for Everest aspirants. Expedition companies must be held accountable.

Malay Mukherjee, who summited Everest in 2015, advises early starts to avoid congestion. Better coordination between teams, staggered summit attempts, efficient rope management and stronger rescue systems are equally necessary.

Above all, Everest needs a return to ethical mountaineering values.

The mountain was once approached with humility, preparation and reverence. Today, commercial ambition often overshadows caution and respect for nature.

Courtesy - Deccan Herald

Memorium

Vijay Crishna

Nandini Purandare



Very recently we lost a very dear friend and dynamic worker for the club for many years – Mr Vijay Crishna. He was a brilliant actor, handsome, charming, with a dry tongue-in-cheek humour. It's hard to remember Vijay without that lovely smile that always reached his eyes.

Crishna was a corporate chieftain – a director of several Godrej companies. But I think his first love was theatre and cinema. His acting prowess in so many memorable roles are

unforgettable.

His added passion was one for exploration, hiking and trekking. To quote from an article – “Crishna’s fascination with explorers — and with exploration — began at school in Simla where he studied before heading to Mayo, in Ajmer, and eventually to St Stephen’s, in Delhi. “I used to walk about three miles to school back in Simla, and that, sort of, cured me of the concern about walking,” says Crishna whose bookshelf is biased towards the likes

of Colin Thubron, Peter Matthiessen and, of course, Bertolt Brecht and co.” His public talks on his Antarctica trip, his study and presentation on Zheng He, that magnificent maritime adventurer from China, are particularly memorable.

Crishna was a member of The Himalayan Club for maybe 45 years? Wow! He was a dynamic office bearer and took on the job of Hon Secretary of the Club, making his mark by contemporising the way the Club was run. I recall, for some reason, way before I became an active member, he included me as a special invitee for several Managing Committee meetings, in order to increase presence of women in an all-male domain. That was what really got me working here over 20 years ago.

Vijay Crishna, as with most of us, was different things to different people. For The Himalayan Club he was an icon who we must celebrate and emulate. Rise so we can dedicate a moment in our lives to him.

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Published for The Himalayan Club

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